

Lassen Peak Human Stories Audio Tour

Snowy Mountain

Lassen Peak has been an iconic northern California landmark for thousands of years. Witnesses of its grandeur have given this mighty volcano many names. At least four American Indian groups frequented the area ascribing translated names such as Mountain Which was Broken Off, Fire Mountain, Mountain Ripped Apart, and Snowy Mountain. The European explorers that followed gave the mountain their own names, often incorporating a tribute to themselves or a previous explorer. San Jose, Lawson's Butte, Snow Butte, and Mount Lassen all lost the name race to the volcano's final identity as Lassen Peak.

Close Call

Around midnight on May 19, 1915, Elmer Sorahan was awakened by his dog barking and pawing him furiously. Dressing quickly, Elmer went outside expecting a bear or other animal. Instead, he dimly saw a 12-foot-high wall of muddy water and logs rumbling down Hat Creek. After running more than a mile to warn his downstream neighbors, the Halls, he burst through their front door exhausted and shouting "Get out! Get out! There's a flood coming." Mrs. Hall quickly spread the alarm downstream by telephone and then the family scrambled uphill just before the house was swept off its foundation. The next morning residents of the area saw that a wide swath of the northeast slope of Lassen Peak had been devastated by a huge avalanche melted snow and mud triggered by a powerful explosion at the volcano's summit. Fortunately, because of the warnings, no one was killed, but several houses along the creek were destroyed.

A Closer Look

When Lassen Peak first erupted in 1914, curious locals flocked to witness its awakening. One particular group of sawmill workers left from Manzanita Lake to investigate the billowing cloud of smoke and ash spewing from the volcano's summit. While most of the group turned back upon reaching the newly formed crater, one daring soul lingered: "Just as I turned to leave the crater's rim, there was a puff of blue smoke, followed by a tongue of red flame...I started to pick my way down the mountain, but in a trice I was enveloped in a cloud of smoke, while a perfect hail of small volcanic bombs and cinders beat down upon me. I was struck by a stone about twice the size of my fist and felled me to the ground." Lucky to be alive, Lance Graham was rescued and transported to Redding Hospital where he was treated for numerous broken bones and deep lacerations on the back of his head.

In the Name of Science

In September of 1863, scientist William H. Brewer led a group of four men on the California Geological Survey, an ambitious mission to gather information about California's geology. This original survey spurred the creation of the United States Geological Survey, a marker of which can be found on the highest precipice of Lassen Peak. Brewer wrote about his experience in his book *Up and Down California*. "We reach the first summit, and the northern scene comes in view...We cross a snow field, climb up boulders, and are soon on the highest pinnacle of rock...The dawn rises and spreads along the distant eastern horizon. Its rosy light gilds the cone of red cinders across the crater form where we are...Several low peaks about us are spotted with fields of snow, still clean and white...Little lakes bask in the sunlight here and there, as blue as the sky above them...Many volcanic cones rise, sharp and steep, some with craters in their tops, into which we can see—circular hollows, like great nests of fabulous birds." So captivated by the spectacular scene before him, Brewer commented, "in looking at the distant view I have almost forgotten that nearer home, just about the peak itself."

Photographing a Restless Giant

In the late 1800s, a pioneering young man camped beside Manzanita Lake decided to make Lassen country his permanent home. Benjamin F. Loomis homesteaded the small town of Viola in 1897 where he and his wife Estella established a post office and sawmill. Here Loomis practiced his hobby of photography, developing an expertise that allowed him to capture the dramatic awakening of a restless giant. Loomis arrived with a number of other newsmen and photographers a few days after Lassen's initial eruption on May 19, 1914. As other photographers hurried off to distribute their pictures to the newspapers, Loomis lingered near Manzanita Lake where he fortuitously captured a remarkable series of photographs documenting an eruption from its abrupt beginning to its climactic end. Loomis' camera and photos from this famous eruption series can be seen in the museum B.F. Loomis built in 1927 near Manzanita Lake to showcase his work and later generously donated to the park.

Lookout

Lassen Peak's first eruption on May 30, 1914 was only 10 minutes long. Cattleman Bert McKenzie happened to be looking directly at the mountain when the first steam and smoke appeared. He phoned the Forest Service office in Mineral to report that the mountain was "blowing up." Forest Ranger Robert Abbey investigated the following day, trudging through deep snow to Lake Helen. Here the skeptical ranger found four to five inches of ash and new boulders measuring nearly two feet across. Fortunately, the Lassen Peak fire guard had not yet arrived for the season as Robert Abbey noted that the fire lookout near the top of Lassen Peak had been hit by rocks. By October, what remained of the fire lookout had disappeared forever under rock and ash. In September, the Mineral Forest Service office issued a report recounting the story of a fire guard on a mountain just south of Lassen Peak. "Mr. Wade...on Turner Mountain, distinctly saw luminous bodies which appeared to him to be red-hot stones thrown out...This is the first time that any forest officer has seen indications of fire or molten material...The crater opened up on the west side of the mountain for a considerable distance and considerable quantities of steam issued from its entire length."

Ladies First

In the summer of 1864, a young couple left Red Bluff on horseback on their way to the high Sierra. Aurelius W. Brodt, a young ailing man, had hopes of improving his health through living in the great outdoors. One evening, Aurelius and his wife Helen Tanner Brodt received an unexpected invitation from a party led by Major Pierson B. Reading to join them on a summit of Lassen Peak. On their way to the summit, the group came upon a stunning sapphire-colored lake which would soon bear a new name. Aurelius wrote to his mother in New York of their adventure, "...last week Helen and myself climbed and stood upon the very top of Lassen's Peak, eleven thousand feet above the level of the ocean. It was a thrilling adventure—we walked over snow and ice that had probably laid there for centuries—we found a crater in active operation, sending up vast clouds of sulphurous steam and making a deafening roar, similar to an immense steam engine blowing off steam. We found a beautiful lake...which was named Lake Helen, after my wife, she being the first white woman that ever saw it." August 28, 1864.

The Main Attraction

The unexpected eruption of Lassen Peak put the little-known volcanic region on the national radar. Cinder Cone National Monument and Lassen Peak National Monument were established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907. Prior to Lassen's highly publicized eruption these two monuments constituted the core of the future park. Following the initial dispatch of Lassen Peak's first eruption on May 30, 1914, news about the active volcano spread rapidly. National publicity of the eruptions helped spur support of a park bill long championed by Congressman John Raker. On December 6, 1915, Raker introduced his park bill to Congress for the third time. The bill garnered overwhelming support with assistance from Redding Searchlight journalist Michael Dittmar and Red Bluff businessman Arthur Conard. Passed through both House and Congress without opposition, the bill establishing Lassen Volcanic National Park was signed by President Woodrow Wilson on August 9, 1916.